

Presentation to the Blaine House Conference on Maine's Creative Economy
Felicia Knight
Director of Communications, National Endowment for the Arts

I'm supposed to talk about the national perspective on the Creative Economy. Not being a biomedical researcher or a silicon chip engineer, I'm going to focus my remarks on the artistic components of the Creative Economy.

I think the NEA perspective is the same as the state or local perspective. And that is that without the arts in our schools and in our communities, our lives are not as fulfilled as they could be – or even as they should be.

When people look for a place to live and work, they look for a community that has much to offer.

Obviously, certain things are going to be foremost on people's lists of what they need. Can I earn a living here? Can my children get a good education here? Can I afford a home here? Can I pay the taxes here?

Hand in hand with those questions is, what is available here beyond work and school that will make my life more satisfying?

At the NEA, we try very hard to invest in the arts in as many communities as possible. (In fact, Chairman Gioia has delivered the edict that in this fiscal grant cycle; we will award at least one direct grant in every community in America, and we gauge that by Congressional District because that gives us a measure that averages out to every 750,000 people.)

I use the term "invest" deliberately because for every dollar that NEA invests in an arts organization, between seven and eight more are generated.

All of our grants require at least a one-to-one match, but beyond the matching funds come other dollars in the form of donations, ticket sales, money spent in ancillary activities ranging from parking to dining to shopping.

A community that creates an environment in which the arts are taken seriously is often able to develop an economic ecosystem in which other businesses can thrive.

While the economic argument is a strong one to make for the arts – we at NEA believe that that should not be the *primary* argument. Communities should embrace the arts for the sake of the art, for what it can do to enhance and enrich our lives.

Trying to quantify the value of art is nearly impossible.

One of the examples that we've used before is – very often people who have no affinity for or experience with the arts are approached by advocates with an argument along the

line of, “If you give a child cello lessons, you’ll improve his math scores by 30 percent.” Well, that may be true. But what if it isn’t? What if what happens is that you teach a child to play the cello? And what if by playing the cello, that child learns self-confidence? Learns to explore more types of music? And by embracing music decides to try out for a school play? What if performing in a school play whets the appetite for giving the debate team a try? What if by learning to play the cello, that child finds a reason to enjoy going to school that didn’t exist before, becomes a more well-rounded, better-informed, more *fully formed* human being? Where’s the downside in that?

A point that our Chairman, Dana Gioia, has repeatedly made is that communities should embrace the arts in their schools and in their towns because their children and their citizens deserve the opportunities to find more than one path to excellence.

The math scores may not go up. (Mine didn’t!) But the child is greatly rewarded. In economic terms, the cash register may not ring, but the community is greatly enhanced. In making the argument for art *merely* economic, it is reduced to a commodity to be explained by economists.

The success of artistic endeavors in a community need not be measured in the dollars they generate. The enthusiasm they generate should be equally important. When people from across a community feel welcomed and involved in the arts, they feel a sense of ownership in the arts that are presented to them. That sense of ownership will demonstrate the value of art. That value will be felt and universally understood.

A couple of weeks ago, we were pleased to announce at NEA the second phase of our *Shakespeare in American Communities* program: *Shakespeare for a New Generation*. As part of that, I’m proud to say, Maine’s Theatre at Monmouth was chosen as one of 22 theatre companies from around the country that will tour at least 10 communities in their regions with a Shakespeare play. As part of the tour, the companies will include a strong educational component for students.

(Monmouth, by the way, was one of 70 professional theatre companies from around the country to apply for these grants, so you should all be proud of its ability to compete on a national level to take part in this program.)

Our program will allow one of the best artistic organizations in the state to perform for students who otherwise may never have the opportunity to see a live, professional production of the world’s greatest playwright. The exchanges that will happen between those artists and their audiences will be compelling. (I know this because of the success we’ve had with phase one of the project.)

This kind of integration of artists with audience – that goes beyond asking people to buy tickets – is so important to the embracing of the arts by the greater population.

At the same time, artistic and cultural opportunities that take advantage of resources that are native to a community are often the best foundations on which to build Creative Economies.

Later this month, the Downeast Heritage Center will open in Calais. When I worked for Senator Collins, I was able to watch that program from germination to ground-breaking. (A bit of “so you think you know Maine trivia” – a letter in support of that entire effort was the first official letter sent by Susan Collins as a United States Senator. And there were many more to follow in gaining the federal appropriation for the project.) The Downeast Heritage Center is a perfect example of economic and cultural development that builds upon the resources and history that are unique to one region.

Likewise, the Maine Acadian Heritage Council is developing – with the help of a \$30,000 NEA grant – an Acadian cultural heritage trail with an accompanying audio recording that will encompass the beautiful St. John Valley.

No one knows better than people in the arts that there is no guarantee of “if you build it they will come.” But if you offer something that people realize they don’t want to live without, you’ll build a cultural economy where the currency is love and respect for the arts and all they contribute to our humanity.

A final note. You shouldn’t take for granted the support that a conference such as this has enjoyed from the Governor and the Congressional Delegation. I have seen the arts funding crises being thrust upon state arts agencies across the country. To have Governor Baldacci not only attend this conference but to *sponsor* it and lend the weight of his enthusiastic support for it and the ideas generated is invaluable.

On the federal level, Senator Collins is a former member of the National Council for the Arts, the governing board of the NEA. She is intimately concerned with arts issues and advocacy. Likewise, Congressmen Allen and Michaud are both members of the House Congressional Arts Caucus, which is a public statement of their support for the arts.

Maine is where I grew up. (Maine is still my legal address!) Maine is where I learned a love of the arts. It’s a fertile place for art, artists, and audiences for all disciplines. I hope to return here full-time in the not too distant future to a place where art is available, welcomed, supported and valued – not because it’s lucrative, but because it’s necessary and beautiful.